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Lucas Samaras

Boxes

October 30 to December 12, 1971

Museum of Contemporary Art

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Stephen S. Prokopoff

Box #75 1968

Box #1 1962

On Peering into Lucas Samaras' Boxes

The box is a universal form in the twentieth century. Perhaps this is due to the modern artist's predilection for assembled objects or man's acquisitiveness in a materialistic world where everything seems to come packaged. It is not surprising, then, that in 1963 the box demanded and received a show of its own at Los Angeles' Dwan Gallery. To demonstrate the continuing commitment to the format, John Weber, the gallery's co-director and organizer of the exhibition, presented the work of a few of the included artists in depth. Honored in this fashion were, of course, Kurt Schwitters, Louise Nevelson, Joseph Cornell, and along with them, although he was just twenty-seven years old and had made his first box only in 1960, was Lucas Samaras.

During the decade of the sixties, Samaras may have been to the idea of the box as container what Warhol was to the box as package, the ultimate expression. Yet by 1968, the no-nonsense critic, Dore Ashton, could be found complaining that "Lucas Samaras is an artist who has been celebrated rather shrilly lately for his neuroses...All of this Freudian gamesmanship threatens to obscure the genuinely brilliant inventiveness of this whimsical artist...The works of his imagination deserve apprehension in wider contexts than he has been afforded."[1] Fortunately this, Samaras' first retrospective exhibition of boxes, provides an occasion to make a necessary reappraisal of this aspect of his art.

Only a year before his initial essay into the genre, Samaras had graduated from Rutgers University. While there he had studied with Allan Kaprow, an advocate in the integration of the various arts, and especially of the arts with life, a very stimulating idea for young artists at the start of the 1960s, and the creator of Happenings and environments. The first of these, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, was held at the Reuben Gallery in 1959, the first of its two years of existence. Samaras exhibited at the gallery; so, too, did George Segal, whose sketch class he had participated in while at Rutgers. Segal was casting figures in plaster from actual bodies, but, although taken from life and set in actual environments—an elevator, a lunch counter, a laundromat—the figures were left rough and unfinished to become white ghosts of human beings in a tangible, material world. As 1959 passed into 1960 Samaras dipped cloth in plaster and, while the plaster hardened, pinched it into rough human shapes. Compared to Segal's life-sized figures Samaras' are diminutive, at most a foot in length. Nevertheless, their very concentration gives them a compensatory intensity, a quality that he would inject into his similarly scaled boxes.

Claes Oldenburg was another Reuben Gallery exhibitor. Not until 1961 did he open a store on 2nd Street in New York City filled with objects made of plaster, many of which represented food—sandwiches, ice-cream sundaes, pieces of cake. These were also roughly modeled, although as expressions of mass-produced food they were garishly painted in addition. Before that, Samaras, turning from modeled sculpture to assembled objects, had made the three-sided *Untitled Small Box #1* (Prism with Face) 1960, which, banded about with plaster-soaked strips of cloth, brings to mind a piece of cake. Bits of feathers trapped on top in the plaster icing provide a visual delicacy quite at odds with the form's congealed mass. Another *Untitled Small Box #2* (Open Box with Face) of that same year sticks out tongues of coated paper to jam open the lid and prevent it from closing. *Untitled Small Box #3* (Small Cube with Face) 1960, is also tied with plastered cloth strips. It is topped with a crust of stiffened material from whose edges escape more matted bits of feathers. *Untitled Small Box #4* 1960 is also full to overflowing, but now with a more unified mass of plaster over cloth.

When Lawrence Alloway wrote a small Samaras monograph in 1966, he interpreted the rough handling favored by the artists who showed at the Reuben Gallery as an emulation of the textures of urban detritus, fitting for a society that seemed to be choking on its own waste. After all, Schwitters, the Dada master of collage, had proposed that objects cast off by a highly industrialized culture, by a reverse process of being found by chance, could become the matter of art when placed in a new context. By this token, stone mouldings and painted walls, when observed in the rubble of a fallen New York tenement, can assume a poignant beauty if contrasted to the hygienic uniformity of glass-curtained Park Avenue, its deadly monotony the price paid when arbitrary planning is substituted for the free interplay of life. Of course, it should be pointed out that these young men began their artistic lives when Abstract Expressionism was still ascendant. Painters in that style exalted the act of creation by leaving its mark evident in the material itself.

The more formal *Untitled* of 1960 is a clearer manifestation of Samaras' own creative attitude. No longer bulky, the box is shallow and wide. Its interior is filled with a dense assortment of rags and ropes caught in plaster. Since this filling only rises to the edges, the lid appears free to open and close. The inside of the lid is lined with a mirror, which in its turn is covered with myriad tacks affixed by their heads. At first glance the lower portion proffers a soft skin-like or, even more organic, a visceral-like aspect, so that were the box to close, the points would seem to pierce the intestinal shapes. Indeed, in the mirror's reflection this already occurs. Closer study reveals that toward the center the fleshy forms have been pinched into the resemblance of a face, while above the eyes heavy strands suggest a crown of thorns. The religious allusion induced by this hardened Veronica's Veil is reinforced by the fact that the half-opened box is set on end like a devotional diptych on an altar. Seen in this way, the terrible cruelty becomes socially acceptable. Christianity is a blood cult after all.

The cruel tacks and the biomorphic shapes could also remind the spectator of Surrealist art. To quote Dore Ashton again as representative critic: "Samaras has been characterized as a Primitive or Fetishistic artist, but that would place him outside the modern tradition of Dada and Surrealism, to which he certainly owes some allegiance...Samaras' work bristles with sharp extrusions...as would a voodoo object. But then, so does the famous flat iron with spikes [by Man Ray]."[2] However, Samaras was offended recently when another writer situated his

work in a late Surrealist context. This could be understood as the natural repugnance any creative person would feel at the prospect of being classified, especially when this entailed affiliation with a style that is no longer generatively dominant. On the other hand, all of us live and work in a post-Surrealist world, a world which can never be as it was before. Surrealism released images of such potency that they remain as part of our cultural environment. It is possible that art historians writing in the 1930s and 1940s displayed a new enthusiasm for Baroque art, with all its irrationalities, because of the recent experience of Surrealism and so failed to follow their predecessors, whose attention had been directed toward post-Impressionism or the Renaissance, periods when artists were as concerned with structural problems as were the historians' contemporary Cubists. In his novels, for example, Jean Paul Sartre uses Surrealist expressive images on page after page, although he is not considered a member of the movement.

André Breton, who was the spokesman for the group in Paris, wrote the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924. He began by acknowledging their debt to Freud, who the Surrealists believed had freed mankind from a series of religious, social, and moral values when he revealed the irrational nature of man's innermost motives. Breton opposed the prevailing rational attitude which considered only the facts of external experience and proclaimed that it was now necessary to give way to the strange forces in the mind, forces manifested in madness or in dreams. Surrealism was to be pure psychic automatism used to express the real process of thought, that is, thought in the absence of the control of reason and outside of moral or aesthetic preoccupations. These values had to be rejected in order to bring forth the obscure reality of man. This reality differs from one person to another and therefore can't be reduced to a general abstraction. Man looking into himself realized that he was surrounded by shapeless forms. The only apparent reality was death, which reduced him to his only reality, decomposition.

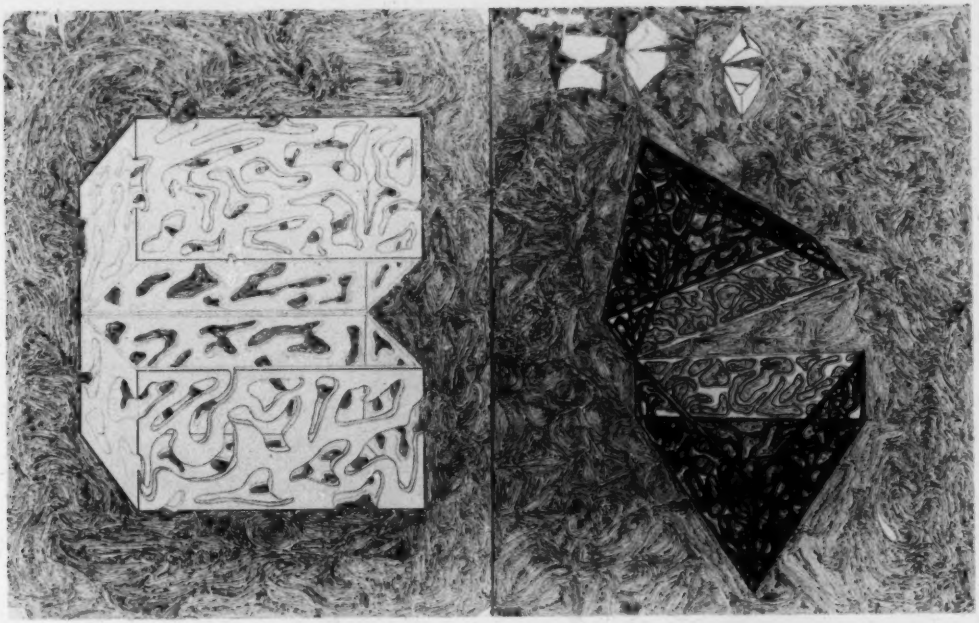
In 1929 Breton published the second Surrealist Manifesto, stating that on the spiritual level life and death, real and unreal, past and future, high and low, communication and uncommunication, may not be opposites. The Surrealists would not attempt to determine the limits of something that is absurd. The purpose would be to underline the chaotic character of the world, to bring about a conciliation of things that oppose each other. Thus an idea found in the work of Surrealist artists and writers is that there is as vague a difference between life and death as between yes and no. Everything is. And the result of this lack of differentiation is the amorphous nature of all things. In the realm of feeling this means an indifference to joy or pain, and it finds expression in an idea of cruelty. Pain is a natural phenomenon, neither happy nor sad, and impossible to explain.

In the realm of art, the Abstract Expressionists were inspired by the Surrealist's psychic automatism when formulating their concept of creative action. Samaras perhaps found encouragement in Surrealism for his art of self-analysis, an art where attraction and revulsion are unseparated. He used tacks, for example, to establish a sharply textured pattern. Such effects appear in his work from the beginning. There are pastels, a medium he had been using since 1958, wherein a flat dark color is punctured by sparks of bright color. Some have flat color areas repeated in precise strips or grids and superimposed on them a still-life or figure. The reflections cause something similar to happen in the box. Samaras also devised abstract works in pastel using rows of similar shapes—crosses, compartments, radial designs. This regularity occurred frequently in conjunction with a geometric base, a feature that here becomes the box.

Given the precision and respect for craft which Samaras evinced in *Untitled*, it is easy to comprehend why his work was soon compared to that of Joseph Cornell. For any young artist concerned with it as a compositional device, the box would mean Cornell. He had experimented with constructions in the early 1930s after discovering work by the exiled Surrealists at the Julien Levy Gallery. By mid-decade he had evolved a simple box, usually glass fronted, in which he arranged objects, photographs, and maps. It was as if the *trompe l'oeil* paintings of the nineteenth century American still-life painters Haberle or Peto had turned back into their models. Cornell's boxes are filled with nostalgic recollections of his home, of art he has seen or books he has read. But though they evoke the past, lost childhoods, lost worlds, these are presented firmly within geometric organizations that can be as taut as those conceived by Mondrian.

Samaras especially seems to retain a pictorial sensibility when he constructs. Instead of exploiting the box's cubic, space occupying quality, he uses his tacks to create a textural pattern, his ropes and rags to accentuate the surface in a linear way until space yields to a two-dimensional disposition. The tacks accentuate the thinness of the space; the mirror dissolves its own surface. Cornell, and before him, Man Ray, had employed mirrors in their collages. Perhaps more significantly, Alice went through the looking glass into a world more unusual than her own. A mirror affords the viewer never ending fascination: "Mirror, mirror on the wall / Who is the fairest one of all?" The fairy tale's rhyme echoes faintly the myth of Narcissus, who was condemned by Nemesis to pine away and die for love of his own image in a pool. In 1961 Samaras appeared in Claes Oldenburg's happening *Fotodeath*, and Oldenburg describes his part as follows: "A man, Lucas, enters from the left in a plain tight, fastidious suit. He admires himself in many mirrors he takes from his pockets. He lies down with a tall mirror, posing himself in different ways, projecting himself upside down, etc."[3] Samaras, looking for himself, reinterprets a myth from ancient Greece.

Samaras was actually born in Greece, in the Macedonian town of Kastoria. He spent eleven and a half years in a world colored by the Greek Orthodox religion, which has its roots deep in the Byzantine tradition. Later he studied art history at Columbia University with the formidable medievalist Meyer Shapiro. It is interesting that the composition of Byzantine mosaics differs from that found in the post-Renaissance West. The Byzantine artist had no desire to group or coordinate parts into an ensemble as a whole, but obeyed his oriental promptings and allowed parts to be multiple, clear, and separate. His spiritualized subjects and his structure are reciprocal; made



Sketch 1966

of colored glass tesserae through which the light passes, an image seems truly weightless and expressive of a transcendental meaning. Such a shining beauty has a deep hold on Samaras, and in his later *Box #4* 1963 the sides, which swing open like those of a portable altar, are lined with tesserae-like pieces of glass. According to his own personal statement made in 1966, Samaras had wanted to be a priest "and be in contact with death, ghosts, shadows, churches, candles, oil, icons, jewels, costumes, music, punishment, incense, bones, devil, angels, magic."[4]

Three Small Untitled Boxes, dating from 1961, utilize the ready-made, leather-grained, spring-hinged containers that watches or jewelry arrive in. The lid of one seems forced back by a mass of escaping hair. The others are wide open, the first revealing a long shape, both hard and cottony, that terminates in a fingernail; the second interior is pierced by a hair-filled hypodermic. Again the artist may have been referring to the religious past. An object of great significance in the church treasury during the Middle Ages, as well as an important commission for the craftsman, was the reliquary for housing sacred relics. A lock of hair, a fibula, nail parings, none were too horrible for contemplative veneration, because they had once been part of a sanctified body. Each of Samaras' boxes takes on a bit of the aura of such a devotional container. By protecting and displaying the real object they also exalt its presence.

The intimate scale of the boxes, however, makes them seem eminently suitable for personal adoration, which indicates that Samaras' reference to the cultural past is but one level of his intent. Underneath, you might say, there are others, and these become progressively more and more personal. Samaras once told an interviewer that Dante, whose work he had studied in a year's course, loomed very large in his estimation. It was particularly the Italian poet's manner of describing something visual as having a number of layers, layers of meaning, that Samaras found so intriguing. So in the boxes are deposited memories of childhood illness, which he can also recall verbally: "Stethoscope, oral-anal-armpit thermometer, antipyrene pills, emetics, douches, rubber tubes, glass vials, fluoroscopes, cotton, steel contraptions, scissors, tweezers, operations, smells. Intolerable invasions of my privacy. EXPOSURE. I remember a photograph of my great grandfather doctor, he had a large, snuff-swollen nose...I wanted to be a doctor."[5]

Still, there is even more to be found. It would seem that this needle, those tacks, reach beyond the stuff of memory to centers even more intensely personal. As he observed to another writer, he was fascinated by "delicate instruments...tweezers, knives, scissors, razors...and incisions." And apropos of this he confessed, "I cannot separate beauty from pain."[6] As Freud grimly reminded us, all externalized love is a retreat from narcissism and has in it an aspect of frustrated vengeance. Should it become overriding, this feeling would bring its possessor dangerously close to algolagnia, that state wherein pleasure, specifically of a sexual nature, is aroused by the infliction or the experiencing

of pain. Fortunately Samaras' mental perspective permits him to channel his aperçu into creative activity. "The manner in which art objects are made are erotic gestures," he states. "However, the eroticism is experienced in the brain...In the presence of an artistic creation there is a seeming merging of the self with a highly erotic reality called beauty...Narcissism is making one's body into art. I learn about art from other art as well as from my own body and its functions. I tune up the erotic in materials. Art works must have more than one side or presence. I find high erotic content in things irridescent, sparkling, fragile, sharp, oily, hairy, pimply, fluffy, dendritic, elastic, pulsating. I love mirrors, shadows, vortexes, lightning, razzle-dazzle, twistedness and nausea, but all these things with control."[7]

Not until 1962 did Samaras begin to number his boxes. The most salient aspect of *Box #1* is undoubtedly the perverse beauty of its embellishment. It is covered with an inordinate number of common pins, bristling in tangles over the surfaces or neatly aligned in rows along the edges of the opening. Inside this hostile nest a stuffed bird lies limply with, among other things, loops of rope and twine, a nylon stocking, metal parts, and a large bunch of colored pencils. The spectator's first reaction is to avoid the object at all costs. However, reflection determines that the pins have been so matted together that their main point is their possibility for glittering texture. As usual, Samaras articulated the case very clearly in the course of a conversation for publication. "When I began using these sort of agressive materials, I suppose I thought of them as being...painful...and touching them or having them in my presence was a disturbing thing, but then after I began using them, they stopped having that quality for me...They were seductive, maybe...They would assert themselves somehow, so that your senses would be...played with."[8]

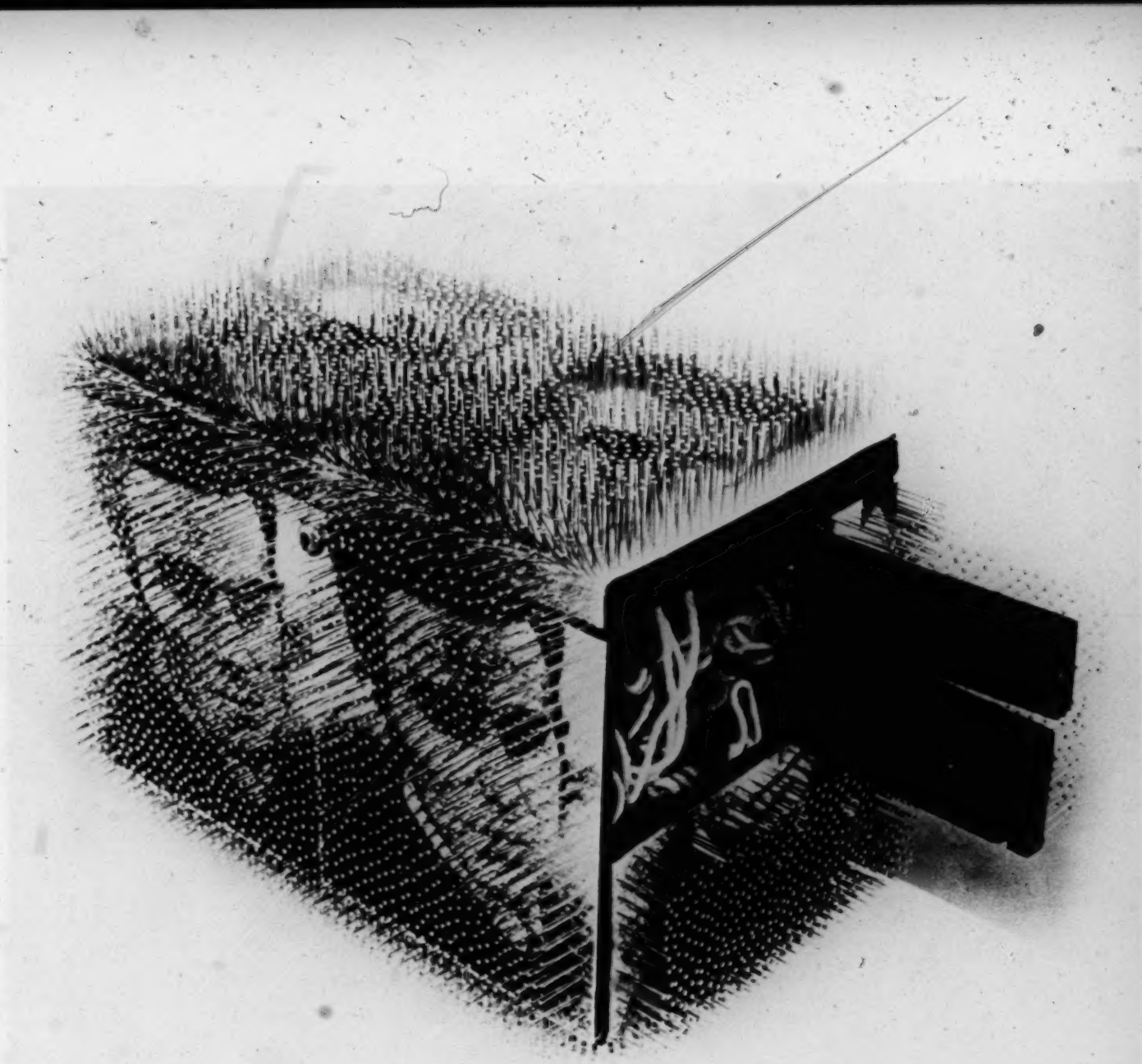
Among the castoffs Samaras has assembled here, it may be that the dead bird seems the most poignant. How has the long line of civilization's inspired winged creatures—Assyrian bulls, Roman victories, Christian angels, the Holy Ghost, come to this pass? Does it help peel off another layer and disclose more memories of Samaras' childhood in a Greece gripped by first the Nazi occupation and then guerilla warfare? What about the pencils heaped high like so many dead bodies? Samaras speculated on this, too, in the course of the aforementioned conversation. "I suppose everything I do has some kind of anthropomorphic character or component, so that when I work with spoons, let's say, it's in terms of definite human connections with spoons...When I was a child in Greece we didn't have toys. Consequently...I used the materials I was given, spoons or whatnot, and they became people. So that objects were somehow either personifications of people, or symbols of people. So, to an extent, even now, when I use materials, a pencil, or whatever, I might from time to time look at them as people."[9]

More than he had done previously, Samaras organized *Box #1* by means of the association of random elements. Significantly, just the previous fall assemblage had been put on the art historical map in the comprehensive exhibition arranged by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art. Seitz explained at the time that assemblagists find their expression through the juxtaposition of objects normally unrelated from a representational point of view. The principle had already been understood by Dada and Surrealist artists, and Marcel Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze* is a telling case in point. Moreover, Duchamp is crucial not only for object art but for art of the container as well. When he selected a bottlerack for exhibition in 1913, Duchamp extended the artist's range of materials, but he also demonstrated that a readymade object can enter into the realm of art when willed by the artist and seen in a new way. Duchamp posed the concept of the box with his *boîtes-en-valise*, ingenious boxes about the size of attaché-cases for holding reproductions of all his works and thus preserving his ideas. *Why Not Sneeze* itself is actually a sort of container: a bird cage filled with marble cube-sugar lumps into which a thermometer and a cuttlebone have been thrust. As a representation such a combination is meaningless; it defies any rational interpretation. Yet certain vibrations may arise from this fortuitous conjunction of objects. These everyday objects, entering into new associations, acquire a strange magic once they become part of a system of unexpected relationships. Max Ernst believed that in such circumstances a poetic transformation took place. Man Ray felt that the result was mystery. The expressive ideas found in recent assemblages may not be more specific, but they do seem more directed toward recognizable meanings. The constant inclusion of artifacts reveals that the multifarious fabric of modern life is certainly a recurrent theme.

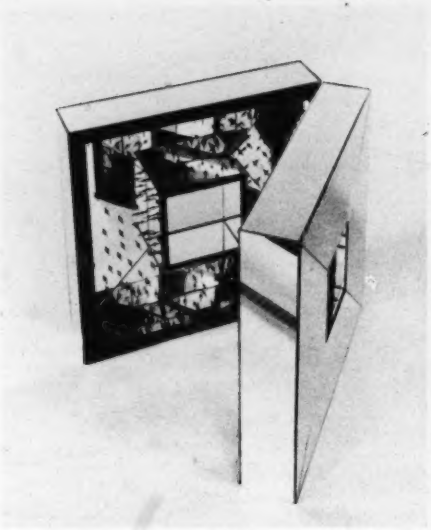
Box #3 1963 is equally pin-covered. Its lid is propped up a pin's length to disclose another limp, dead bird. Here components escape even farther the delimitations of the box form because various kinds of rope trail out of a second opening below. Again there is something of that sense of material profusion which was often observable at the Assemblage show and which was possibly due to the then recent experience of Abstract Expressionism.

Perhaps here the term fetishistic, which critics often use in discussing his work, albeit usually in a vague way, and although Samaras is rather perplexed by it, has some relevance. There does seem to be some similarity to the voodoo objects mentioned by Dore Ashton. In primitive religions a fetish object is believed to be the dwelling of a spirit, or to represent a spirit that may be induced or compelled magically to help the possessor. In the practice of voodoo pins or nails may be stuck in the surrogate object of a dangerous spirit or an intended victim. Samaras' sharp instruments often bring the hint of obsession to a work, but the psychological reference would seem to fit sado-masochism rather than fetishism. The latter involves fixing the attention on a part of the body or on a piece of wearing material belonging to a person. References to classic fetishism can be read more clearly in the works of Bruce Conner, a young vedette of the Assemblage show in 1961, where nylon stockings often keep company with nudie photographs.

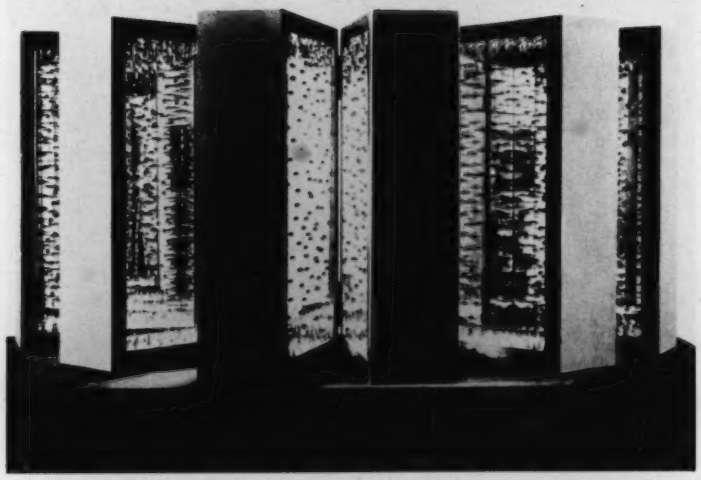
Neither do Samaras' inclinations cause him to continue in this more or less untidy assemblage direction. Objects in his *Box #4* 1963 remain within its confines. "I said earlier that I like things that haven't been violated by me, or anybody else...I suppose I was interested in



Untitled (Face Box) 1963



Untitled (Mirror Box) 1965



Box #7 (Accordion Box with Mirrors and Tacks) 1963

using objects as they exist...I guess at that time I was not really interested in fragments...fragments have ways of grabbing space, I mean the parts that have been removed from the fragment grab space in a...different way than a complete thing. A complete thing sort of just exists. It just stays there. It doesn't fight. It doesn't struggle."[10] The specificity of Samaras' box provides it with the concreteness of form, the self-containment, that is central to the sculpture that is his Mediterranean inheritance.

The lid and the tesseraed sides part to reveal the tack-strewn interior set with a stemmed goblet (the untidy strings now nicely enclosed within its rim), a glass plate, and a mangled fork. This is not the first work in which Samaras made use of cutlery. In 1961 he had squeezed liquid aluminum onto boards, ensnaring a utensil in the center of the web as he did so. An untitled object of the same year has twisted knives, forks, and spoons that erupt through a shattered dinner plate. As he does so often, Samaras operates with more than one consideration in mind: the deeply personal sense that these utensils are personifications of the human predicament (they really are extensions of human hands), and the idea that they are cannibalistic metaphors. "When I first took a fork and bent it, I was thinking about Soutine, who had used two forks that looked as if they were going to attack the meat...So I took a number of forks—they interest me, the forks, more than the spoons. You know, they had these prongs, and they looked like hands, too. I liked that. Twisting them had some kind of punishing quality, something about killing, or murder, or whatever."[11]

The artists who had exhibited at the Reuben Gallery had displayed a remarkable interest in the idea of eating, and an interest in commercial food became very evident as Pop Art evolved. In a sense the food stands for society's mass appetite, the appalling fact that its voracious consumption of goods is devouring the natural environment, that wildlife must needs be sacrificed for its desires. Although Tennessee Williams wrote *Suddenly Last Summer* in 1958, the movie version appeared in 1960. Near its end there was the sensational scene of Sebastian's death by cannibalism. But indelibly etched into the viewer's consciousness was the earlier speech of Mrs. Venable. The words describe the newly hatched turtles of the Gallapagos Islands and their struggle to reach the sea under the attack of devouring birds, but they arose out of Williams' horror upon learning that atomic experiments were threatening life on those very islands where Darwin discovered its evolution.

The iconography of *Untitled* (Face Box) of 1963 is so personal, both explicitly and implicitly, that it becomes a self-portrait. The box has been given its own spinose ambiance by means of the multitude of pins neatly stuck all over its surfaces, even the front where instead of a mirror the artist has affixed his mirror images, two photographs of himself side by side. At one end two panels open out to expose the box's innards of tangled yarn. Recalling his childhood, Samaras has stated that: "Watching a slaughter of a lamb, a pig, rabbit or chicken in the front yard was somewhat easier [than his previously described medical experiences]. I could turn away if the blood spilled too fast or leave when the smell of boiling water and split intestines got too strong. I would sometimes get too attached to the animal but it wouldn't matter, the butchery would take place anyway and I'd stay to watch. Butchery was an amazing transformation process; a walking

breathing animal became through the intervention of a sharp instrument wielded by a determined adult a strange combination of things and textures...there was pleasure in opening revealing destroying things. However, living and non-living things had a certain immunity. To alter something was a terrible thing to do...Everything had feelings, life was erotic-occult. This force to destroy or caress, touch or not touch has always been with me."[12] Once the box has been stuck with pins and its side opened up by means of that craftsmanship special to the artist, it is transformed from something too immediate into a unique object of things and textures, a work of art once removed from life.

Still the observer can't help noticing that here the pins tattoo a representation of Samaras himself. The psychoanalyst's explanation for masochism—that when sexual pleasure is made a forbidden activity, gratification may be experienced only when it has been preceded by pain, the punishment for the guilt to be incurred—is well known. So, too, is the war in which fantasies that might otherwise prove debilitating, can be sublimated in creative energy. But as always in Samaras' case, he places the needed distance between what is actual and what is art. He exorcizes the evil spirit by sticking pins in an objectification of himself.

Samaras concluded that part of his statement just quoted above by saying that he made things to seduce himself. However, he can also remember a time when art itself was a forbidden game. "In high school art continued to an extent to be an escape. The fantasy, I suppose, was very important since reality at that time was...not very pleasant...and I guess art served as some kind of a pleasing thing...at the same time...there were pressures put on me not to do that, not to paint, not to draw...not to play with clay. Because, I guess, my father was afraid that it would lead me into art, and of course he knew that being an artist was very tough...So consequently, I guess, this pressure against it helped me go into it. Like doing something you shouldn't be doing."[13] The subdivisions found in Samaras' boxes, the smallness of the objects he puts in, generally force us to draw close to look at them. It's as if we were peeking where we shouldn't. In many cases he tempts us to open lids, or to pull out drawers. This is certainly true of *Box with Bird* 1963, one of the most profoundly beautiful of this early set of boxes.

The back of the *Box with Bird* rises to a greater height than the front, and the slanting top thus created opens at the center to form two lateral wings. Lining the back wall of the interior are again two photographs of the artist, but this time they are pierced with only a few pins. However, dark threads dangle from each pin like blood from the arrows that in paintings of his martyrdom stud the body of Saint Sebastian. The theme of the Roman youth who died for his faith is particularly poignant because it entails a vision of beauty that is wantonly destroyed. Another of these photographs, less clear and more like a photo-copy, appears inside the lid's right half. Pinned upon it is a length of braided yarn that winds across the face the way a snake would. In medieval Christian iconography the snake is a symbol of evil, and as such it is trampled underfoot. Serpents are also traditionally associated with death, if only because of Cleopatra and the asp. Inside the box proper, placed to the right, is an empty, clear plastic box. To the left, now erect and in a soaring pose, is the stuffed bird, which in turn directs the attention toward the left wing. There it is a pin construction that obscures the photo-copy. From each pin set around the borders of the face strings are stretched to other pins; as they cross each other a complicated maze results.

The figure of the maze, as Lawrence Alloway clearly demonstrated, epitomizes Samaras' structural expression: since focal points occur all over his complex structures, they are in this sense labyrinthine. He organizes his objects in terms of cells, demanding that they be viewed one after the other. Of course, every cultural period has its spatial ideal. The humanist artists of the Renaissance postulated a defined, limited world and developed mathematical one-point perspective to depict it. The Baroque artists' vigorous religious faith prompted them to paint a space that flowed continuously from the sensory world to infinity, the realm of the divine. The idea shaping the Surrealist world was that the incomprehensible had to be portrayed as it is, so the labyrinth was what defined space. In the way that Theseus followed the thread through the Cretan Labyrinth to confront the dangerous Minotaur, Samaras traces memories through his mind and his art, however perilous the journey may prove. "A part of art is memory. Memory is erotic because it has the capacity of making past life the exclusive property of the individual who exercises it. Further, it combines stories with past life creating a bottomless, beginningless vapor trail."[14] Or perhaps he is like Daedalus, the Athenian architect and inventor who designed the Labyrinth, in which he was later imprisoned with his son, and from which they escaped by means of the artificial wings he fabricated.

The *Box with Bird* is the first box here discussed where the various colors of wool yarn have been used to cover the exterior with a striated pattern. That linearity already noted in the blanketing of the inner surfaces with tacks or pebbles is carried over into the vermiculated designs on the exterior. When the color of the boxes was intensified in this way during 1963, their referential possibilities were likewise enhanced. The flat color patterns might recall the colored enamels decorating medieval shrines. The yarn could bring to mind the designs embroidered on folk costumes, which the Greeks make so elaborately. "So when I say art is an attempt to recapture the past I mean art is an attempt to recapture lost beauties, lost excitement, things that you lose in a lifetime: parents, children, homes, traditions, perspiration, environments, events, attachments."[15] In this connection it is fascinating to remember that the richness and linear markings now adorning his boxes had appeared earlier in Samaras' pastels. "Well, I have a tendency never to give up anything...my work has its own history, and all these things turn out to be related in some way...Consequently, when I use a material, let's say wool, for example, you know wool stripes...if I had just come upon the idea of using wool, slowly, I would also become aware that the wool stripes related to my pastels, where I used pastel stripes."[16] If a difference is to be observed in the color treatment of the pastels and the boxes, it is that the later patterns may be less regular and more coiling and enclosing like the maze.

Box #10 1963 is somewhat like the top of an Empire bureau: once the lid is raised drawers with curved profiles swing out to either side to disclose yet another container. The spatial concept is even more intricate, comprised of layers or tiers, hidden compartments or recesses. The various compartments with their glass, plastic and metal contents, gleam coldly. Inside the lid are two photographs representing identical fragments of the artist's face. These appear in oval frames, the curves of which are continued in the colored wool lines surrounding them—expanding in broad bands around that at the left where the eye can be clearly seen, contracting in concentric rings where the eye is veiled with shadow, its sense turned inward.

The eyes are the only features in the photograph that are included in their entirety. An eye often appears in Surrealist art as a sign of consciousness. Surrealism's aim was the expression of man's endless anguish, because merely by being alive he is blocking his own way. As he can't understand himself, he blocks or loses any proof that he is alive. The only idea of life is that one opposes oneself, so life is self-torturing. In it there is a never ceasing compulsion to think, which he realizes leads him nowhere. As usual, Samaras renews a Surrealist image with his highly charged personal meanings. He also departs from Surrealism in that his intent is never ambiguity, although more than one writer has used the term for his art. His objects may be metaphorical, their meanings carrying the possibility of amplification, but shown, they are not inscrutable. "No, no. I'm never interested in ambiguous response. Rather a positive-negative, you know: touch or not touch, the quality of seducing-repelling."[17] Nowhere does Samaras express this more finely than in *Box #11* 1963. The box closes with a curved lid. A small light circle on the lid begins to send wool stripes radiating out over the whole box, which is equally covered with pins—the tender and the sharp, like love and pain, only in visual terms.

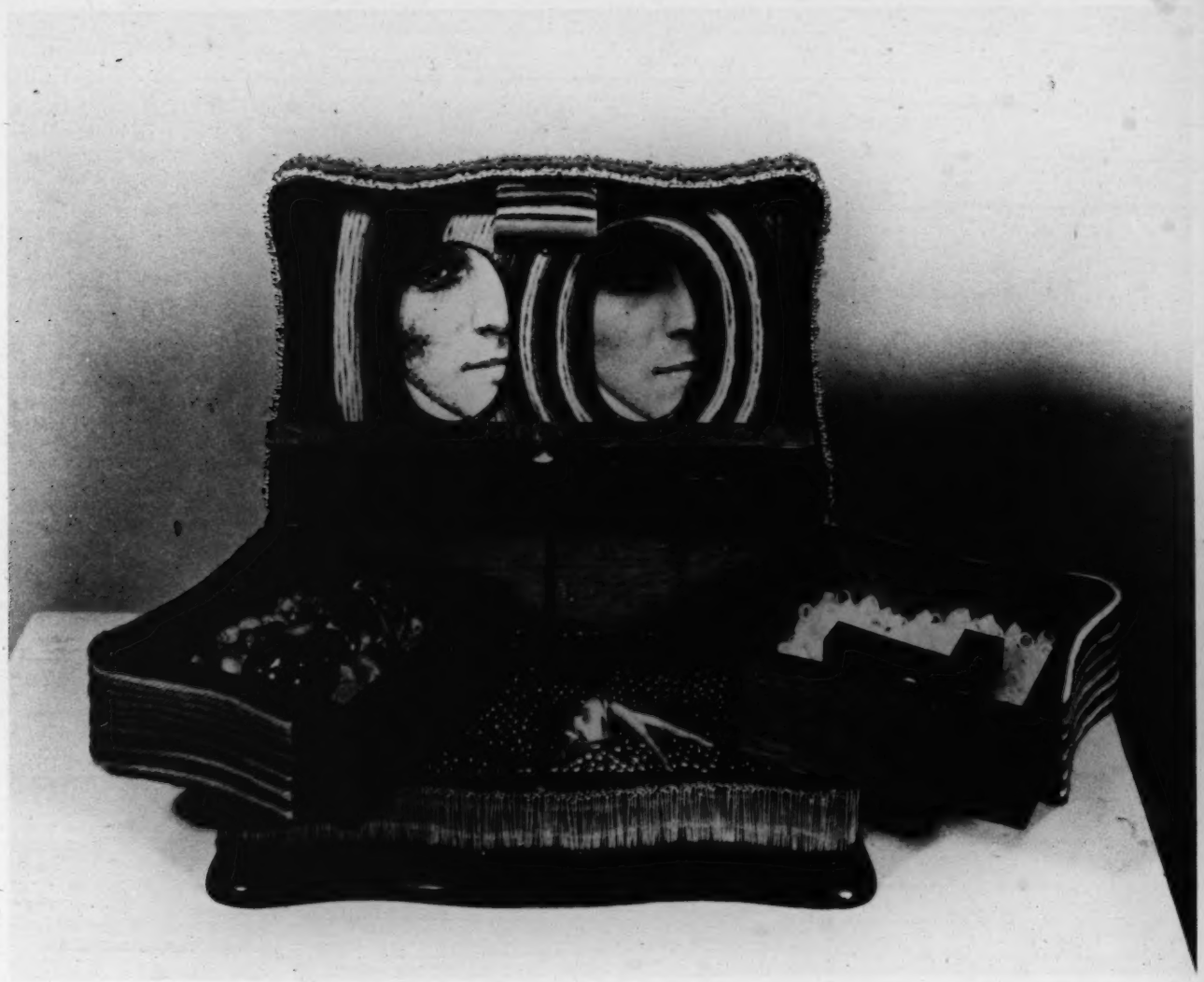
Although by 1963 his boxes were displaying an increased elaboration, Samaras did not forego his vigilant control over his forms, so that precision keeps pace with lushness. By this time the *boîte trouvée*, with its own accumulation of references, may be replaced by boxes made to the artist's order. They are stripped down until they become more a support for the visual ideas and less a contributing part of an assemblage. In the same year a commanding structural strength begins to assert itself, as, for example, in *Box #7* (Accordion Box with Mirrors and Tacks). The box stands on end and opens out into six wings, all of whose interior sides are faced with tack-lined mirrors. The lid of *Untitled* of 1960 appears to have multiplied into so many Iron Maidens, which then go on to reflect themselves into infinity.

Samaras' sense of form seems to become more stringent by 1965. One clarifying element is his use of crystals in various boxes, either to embellish the exterior or to define even more definitely than could tacks the planes on the inside. *Box #27* 1965 is a crystal encrusted box with a lid that is shaped up to a peak. The crystals proffer another layer of reference as well as ornament, harking back to the Middle Ages when reliquaries were adorned with crystals and precious stones to prove the value of the contents as aids in the quest for salvation. The present holdings would also seem to be speculations on the future: an insect is caught in a field of pins sticking up from a photographic negative of the artist which has been laid out across the bottom of the box. The lid's interior is covered with a hank of hair, like hair that is supposed to keep on growing after a person is closed in his coffin. *Box #23* 1964 is a vision of man's final reality. It is entirely covered with thicknesses of hair from which extrude fine skeletal toes.

Then *Box #36* 1965 is again clean and rectangular. The outside planes are emphasized by a transverse run of alternating dark and light colored yarn stripes. A layer of clear crystals insists on the planarity of the interior. The crystals gleam like jewels in milady's vanity, and like such a box the inner lid is provided with a frame for a mirror. But the reflection is the artist's mirror-image, a photograph so startlingly large that only the probing eyes can be accommodated.

Box #38 (Hermaphrodite) 1965 is also of the rectangular vanity or jewel box variety, complete with a movable tray. As in *Box #36* the surface is reiterated by means of contrasting stripes, however this time the yarn follows the plane's longitudinal direction. The interior is compartmentalized, and the divisions are accented in their two-dimensional extensions by beds of shells, plastics, screws, and cotton. The drawer that pulls out below is spread with crystals, but here a brush has been provided to push them aside like so many mental shadows in order to reveal the ubiquitous photograph, which in this particular case is nude and equipped with female genitalia. It must delight Samaras that both masculine and feminine traits might appear in the same person. Although the possibility may only be dawning in the minds of His-and-Her persuaded Americans, the Greeks had a myth for it. Besides, maleness is represented in the front compartment above by a hypodermic needle, although the measurements on the syringe remind the viewer how absurd it is to try to determine sexual reality when it cannot be absolutely defined. Vertical items rise up in the rear row—a metallic finger, a pencil, the tail of a sea horse. This latter and the fragile sand dollar resting on the cotton in the center once more direct the attention back to the Mediterranean land that cradled both myth and artist. What is more, a hole has been burrowed into the center of the layer of nails on the inside of the lid, in order that Samaras' likeness can peer through. "I'm interested in myself as I existed at a particular time, I'm interested in knowing as much as possible about the relationships I made with people, either happy ones or unhappy ones. In order to find out about the past, I have to dig into the past."[18] Samaras has said.

Box #40 1965 offers proof, if any should be needed, that Samaras achieved an added formal strength in his work without sacrificing his power of expression. The box, covered with a meandering yarn pattern, stands upright on its side as did the *Accordion Box* of the previous year. The two-tiered lid parts at its center, and each doubled half swings aside like the wings on a medieval *flügelaltar*. The wing interiors on the right side are mirrored and tacked. For the interior of the box proper, Samaras has pulled off another layer: his photograph has been reduced to a clinical x-ray of his skull. Rows of pins follow the nebulous outlines of the forms, while other pins are stuck in a diaper



Box #10 (Self-Portrait) 1963

pattern over the whole image like stars shining in the sky. "I continuously shift my attention to the things that bother or frighten me. Photography has pretty much eliminated the need to paint reality. It has brought us closer to such aspects of life as murder, sex, stars, microbes, machines. By holding these things in our hands they become material sparks."[19] Before Samaras, the Spanish Surrealist painter Joan Miró had also felt free to paint such subjects. In his *Person Magnetized by Stars* of 1939, a little figure is surrounded by blots of color, crisscrossing lines, sprouting cellular shapes, and suspended organic shapes, all to suggest that the strange forces in which the figure is caught up have a sexual origin. Because the Surrealists were concerned with man's inner reality, their images are biological and show no correspondence among themselves. Life may appear abundant, a matter of continual growth, but it obeys an unknown law, it is not orderly, and this leads to a shapeless world. Samaras, on the other hand, is seeking to exorcize life's frightening forces.

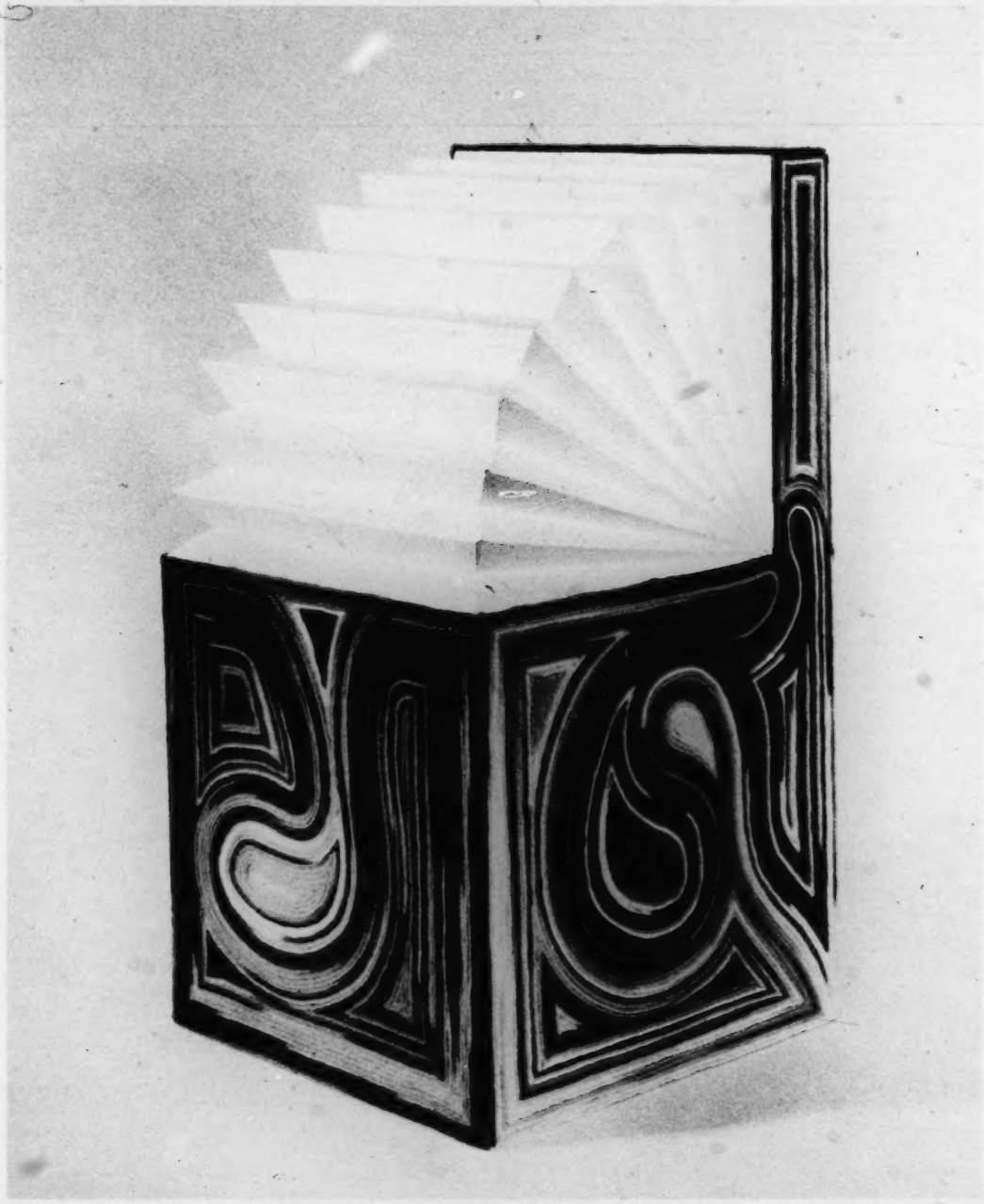
The inner surfaces of the wings to the left of the box are even more abstract. They are white planes shaped to rise to a central point on one side, depressed to a similar point in correspondence on the other. This geometric abstraction indicates one of the directions Samaras' art will take. *Untitled* c.1965 is a plain plywood rectangle with considerable sense of bulkiness. The inner lid is at first covered by a rising shaped plane at the left, but this is stopped by a blackness at the center. To the right shallow rectangles, each one smaller than that before, are superimposed to form a ziggurat. The box's interior displays just the reverse: the shaped plane is recessed and the rectangles descend in great steps toward the dark, like the entrance to a Mycenaean tomb.

Box #43 1966 is a stunning step in Samaras' other direction. It is a rectangle, the yarn striated on the sides, undulating on the top, except at the center of the front edge where the wool cover is cut and peeled back to right and left. Its nether side as well as the revealed box top are coated with crystals. Where the split ends there occurs an incision like a wound, or the female sex organ; as such it is a witty visual pun, since "box" is slang for this part of a woman's anatomy. But a dark opening amid crystalline glitter plunges us back to some prehistoric beginning, to the luxurious all-embracing feminine deities worshipped for their fecundity. The sorcery is undiminished once the lid is lifted and its inner lining of crystals exposed. The compartments below are lined with such things as plastic disks, screw eyes, shells, and nails. A sand dollar reposes in one large center chamber, a finger or similarly shaped object in metallic wrapping in another. In the flanking smaller cells a nautilus shell sits opposite a compass, there, it would seem, to mock the idea of charting a direction in a world obeying biological necessity. Two divisions away rests a glass eye, implacably open forever.

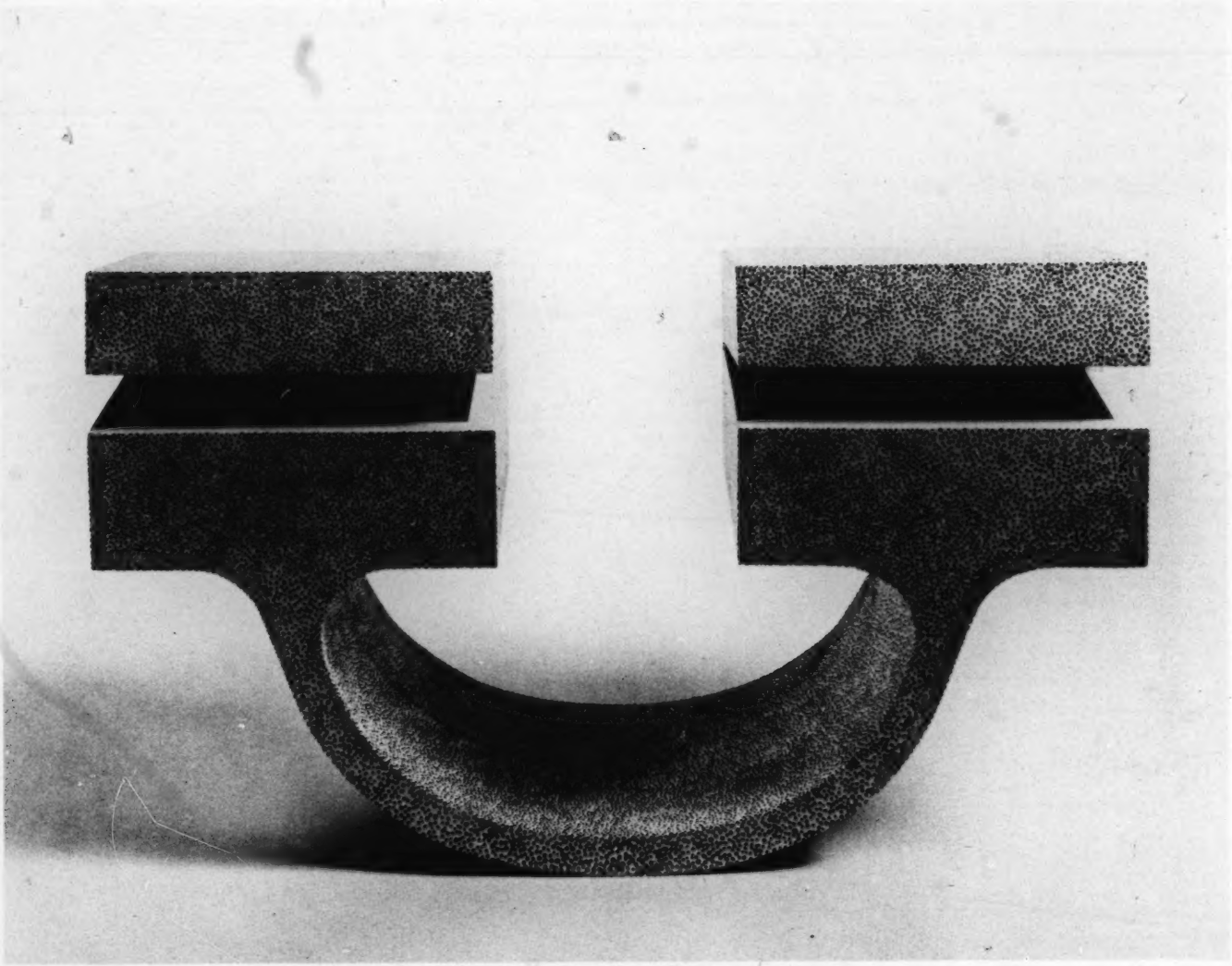
Box #45 1966 marked by an almost architectural bulk, returns to the other, more abstract, side in Samaras' on-going balancing act. The opening between box and lid is filled with wooden accordion pleats. The cube itself is decorated with yarn in an undulating pattern. The cubic *Box #54* 1966 has a similar design, except the sides are cut open in shapes dictated by the wanderings of the wool. Emptied of more representational freight, the container is freed to become the essence of Samaras' expression. Although this will become the persistent strain in his work, boxes carrying more iconographic material, for example the chilling *Box #62*, can still be found in 1967. The lid's crystalline lining is slit part way down and pulled to either side. A second, inner lining is treated in the same way. Beyond this labial opening and partially muffled by it is the photograph presiding as ever over the compartments below, which are filled with cotton or glass vials. Tenderly reposing on the cotton, gleanings from the generative sea—the leg of a crab, sand dollars, a sea horse—are centered on a denture. Two medical photographs, a man with a goiter, the swollen body of a woman, tied to each flank of the box add pressure to the idea of decomposition and decay. Recently Samaras had occasion to discuss several of the stories he has written over the years. "The early stories are violent, involving tearing—all that; and the later ones are more contemplative, and yet in the later ones I'm really talking about my own extinction, my own death, my own quiet disappearance. I mean it doesn't matter what I do to you, I could cut you to pieces or I could have people do this or that violent thing, but when I begin to think about my own disappearance isn't that more violent really, isn't that more ferocious?"[20]

This refinement of the effect of pins or crystals heralds the geometric abstraction Samaras brought to his cut and painted wood boxes through the summer of 1968. The surface of *Box #68* is entirely stippled. It rests on the four pyramids that form its four corners. Four more pyramids rise at each angle of the lid. Indeed, only the opening for the lid proclaims it to be a box. The rectangle of *Box #70* rests on two curves that rise on either side of it like parentheses. Although stippled in front, stripes are painted on the sides in a logical reduction of the striated wool. In *Box #72* two rectangular boxes terminate, serif-like, the curves of an inverted U. The concept is so spare that a visitor, coming upon the object unaware in a gallery, might think it a piece by a Minimal sculptor. "On one side in my work, I have always been interested in more human things. If you look at my pastels, you find things that relate to hard-edge people."[21] Samaras' preference for a planar form has become outspoken. In *Box #74*, the actual box marks the center of a curving, labyrinthine cut-out pattern, which no longer shapes out an interior as in *Box #54*. These latest boxes are emptied of contents but not of content. They are the disciplined reductions of those premonitions of resignation and loss so eloquently expressed in *Box #62*. Samaras now evokes responses to his range of sensations—hardness, sharpness, richness, intricacy, in a less literary, more visual manner. But as always, the objects are lovingly and meticulously made, because they are projections of his own body. Samaras the artist presents us with gift boxes of the greatest beauty. However, an artist is first of all a man, and Samaras gives us the most wonderful thing a human being can offer at present, the gift of himself.

Joan C. Siegfried



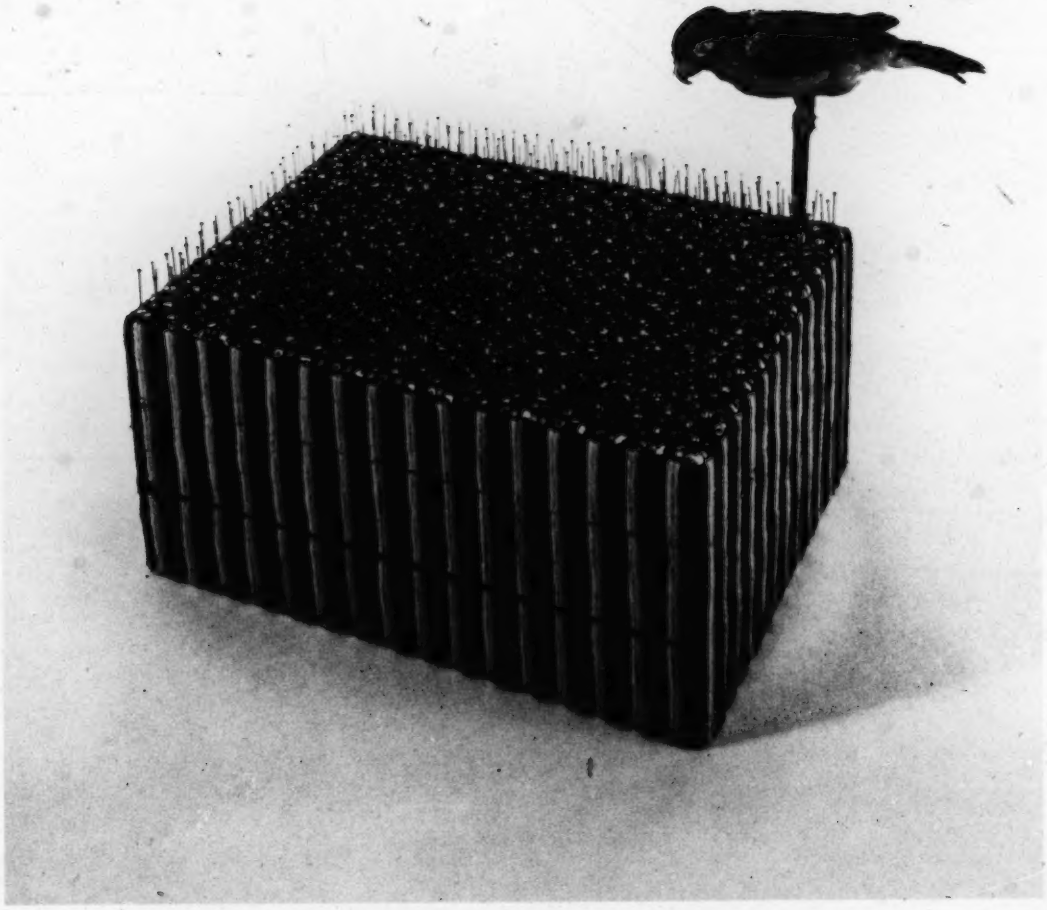
Box #45 1966



Box #72 1968

Notes

1. Dore Ashton, "Lucas Samaras at the Pace Gallery," *Studio*, 176, December 1968, p. 267
2. Dore Ashton, "Lucas Samaras at the Pace Gallery," *Studio*, 173, January 1967, p. 41
3. As quoted in Lawrence Alloway, *Samaras*, published by The Pace Gallery, 1966
4. Artist's statement, as given in Alloway, *Samaras*, p. 39
5. *Loc. cit.*
6. Diane Waldman, "Reliquaries for St. Sade," *Art News*, 65, October 1966, p. 46
7. Alloway, *Samaras*, p. 40
8. Alan Solomon, "Conversations with Lucas Samaras," *Artforum*, 5, October 1966, p. 41
9. *Loc. cit.*
10. Solomon, *Conversations with Lucas Samaras*, p. 43
11. *Ibid.*, p. 42
12. Alloway, *Samaras*, p. 39
13. Solomon, *Conversations with Lucas Samaras*, p. 39
14. Alloway, *Samaras*, p. 39
15. Kim Levin, "Samaras Bound," *Art News*, 67, February 1969, p. 56
16. Solomon, *Conversations with Lucas Samaras*, p. 40
17. *Ibid.*, p. 41
18. *Ibid.*, p. 40
19. Alloway, *Samaras*, p. 40
20. Levin, *Samaras Bound*, p. 37
21. Alloway, *Samaras*, p. 42



Box #47 1966

Catalogue

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth

Untitled Small Box #1 (Prism with Face) 1960
Wood, plastered feathers, stuffing, cloth
11 x 12 x 9
Lent by the artist

Untitled Small Box #2 (Open Box with Face) 1960
Wood, plastered crepe paper, feathers
10¼ x 6 x 7
Lent by the artist

Untitled Small Box #3 (Small Cube with Face) 1960
Wood, plastered feathers, cloth, string
5 x 5 x 5
Lent by the artist

Untitled Small Box #4 1960
Wood, plastered cloth
9 x 11 x 8
Lent by the artist

Untitled 1960
Tacks, plaster, mirror, wood
27¼ x 17½ x 1½
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Guy Weil, New York

Three Small Untitled Boxes 1961
Hypodermic needle, hair, plastic nail, beads, wood, plaster, paint
4½ x 2¾ x 1¼; 4 x 2 x 1; 3½ x 5½ x 5½
Lent by the artist

Box #1 1962
Pins, pencils, string, box, metal, wood
9 x 16½ x 17
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Scull, New York

Untitled (Face Box) 1963
Wood, photo, pins, wool
10½ x 15 x 18½
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Michael Blankfort, Los Angeles

Untitled (Pin Box Construction/Dinner #7) 1963
Pins, aluminum foil, wool, glass, jar
12 x 19 x 10¾
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Mayer, Winnetka, Illinois

Box #3 1963
Woods, pins, rope, stuffed bird
24½ x 11½ x 10¼
Lent by Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Box #4 1963
Pins, razor blades, glass, wood
11 x 13 x 10½
Lent by Mr. Morton Neuman, Chicago

Untitled (Box #5) 1963-68
Wood, wool, beads, bird, cotton, spoon
3½ x 16 x 10½
Lent by the artist

Box #6 1963
Wool, mirrors, glass, string on wood
11½ x 14 x 9
Lent by the artist

Box #7 (Accordion Box with Mirrors and Tacks) 1963
Wood, mirrors, tacks
16 x 10 x 24
Lent by Mr. Rolf G. Nelson, Los Angeles

Box #10 (Self-Portrait) 1963
Wood, wool, pins, pebbles, photo, plastic, glass, wire
6¼ x 11 x 6½
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Max Wasserman, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

Box C (Box #17) 1964
Wood, wool, pins, tacks, mirror, cut glass, plastic
15 x 31 x 15¼
Lent by the artist

Box #23 1964
Wood, pins, mirrors, wool, nylon, plaster, plastic, fish
16 x 17 x 10½
Lent by Miss Carol Samaras, New York

Box #27 1965
Hair, glass, pins, grasshopper, photo negative, beads, wood
16½ x 20 x 12½
Lent by de Menil Foundation, Houston

Box #28 1965
Hair, wood, plastic, paper
20¼ x 15¼ x 28½
Lent by the artist

Box #31 1965
Jewels, mirrors, aluminum foil, metal, epoxy, spray paint on wood
20¾ x 15¼ x 28½
Lent by the artist

Box #32 1965
Wax, bone, hair, wood
12 x 10 x 9
Lent by the artist

Box #36 1965
Wood, wool, photo, beads
6¾ x 13¼ x 9½
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard H. Solomon, New York

Box #38 (Hermaphrodite) 1965
Wood, mirror, latex, photo, yarn
7 x 12 x 8¾
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Glimcher, New York

Box #40 1965
Wood, tacks, mirror, wool, paint, nails, photo
14¼ x 12¼ x 16¼
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard H. Solomon, New York

Box #41 1965
Painted wood, wool
24¾ x 17 x 10¼
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Howard Lipman, New York

Untitled (Mirror Box) 1965
Mirrors, tacks, wool
16 x 16 x 6
Lent by Mr. Leonidas Mavrowites, New York

Untitled c.1965
Painted wood
19 x 13 x 11
Lent by the artist

Box #45 1966
Wood, wool, paint
22 x 12 x 12
Lent by City Art Museum of St. Louis
(Gift of George Schalpp), St. Louis

Box #47 1966
Wood, pins, wool, paint, stuffed bird on perch, beads, shells, metal
10¾ x 11¾ x 8¾
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Louis Lerner, Chicago

Box #48 1966
Wood, sequins, pencils, knives, photo negative, glass, objects
10½ x 18½ x 12½
Lent by Mr. Donald Judd, New York

Box #49 1966
Wood, yarn, beads, plexiglas, plastic
12 x 5 x 9
Lent by Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago

Box #50 1966
Wood, wool, paint
16 x 9½ x 12
Lent by the artist

Box #52 1966
Wood, wool, paint
12 x 12 x 12
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Donald Newhouse, New York

Box #53 1966
Multi-colored yarn, stuffed birds, glass, plastic beads,
tape measure, natural crystal, metal ore
12½ x 12 x 9
Lent by Mr. Fred Mueller, New York

Box #54 1966
Liquitex, wood, wool
14 x 14 x 14
Lent by Harry N. Abrams Family Collection, New York

Transformation Boxes (Set of twelve) 1966-67
Painted cardboard boxes in plexiglas case with formica base
Case: 64½ x 15¼ x 15¾
Lent by Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

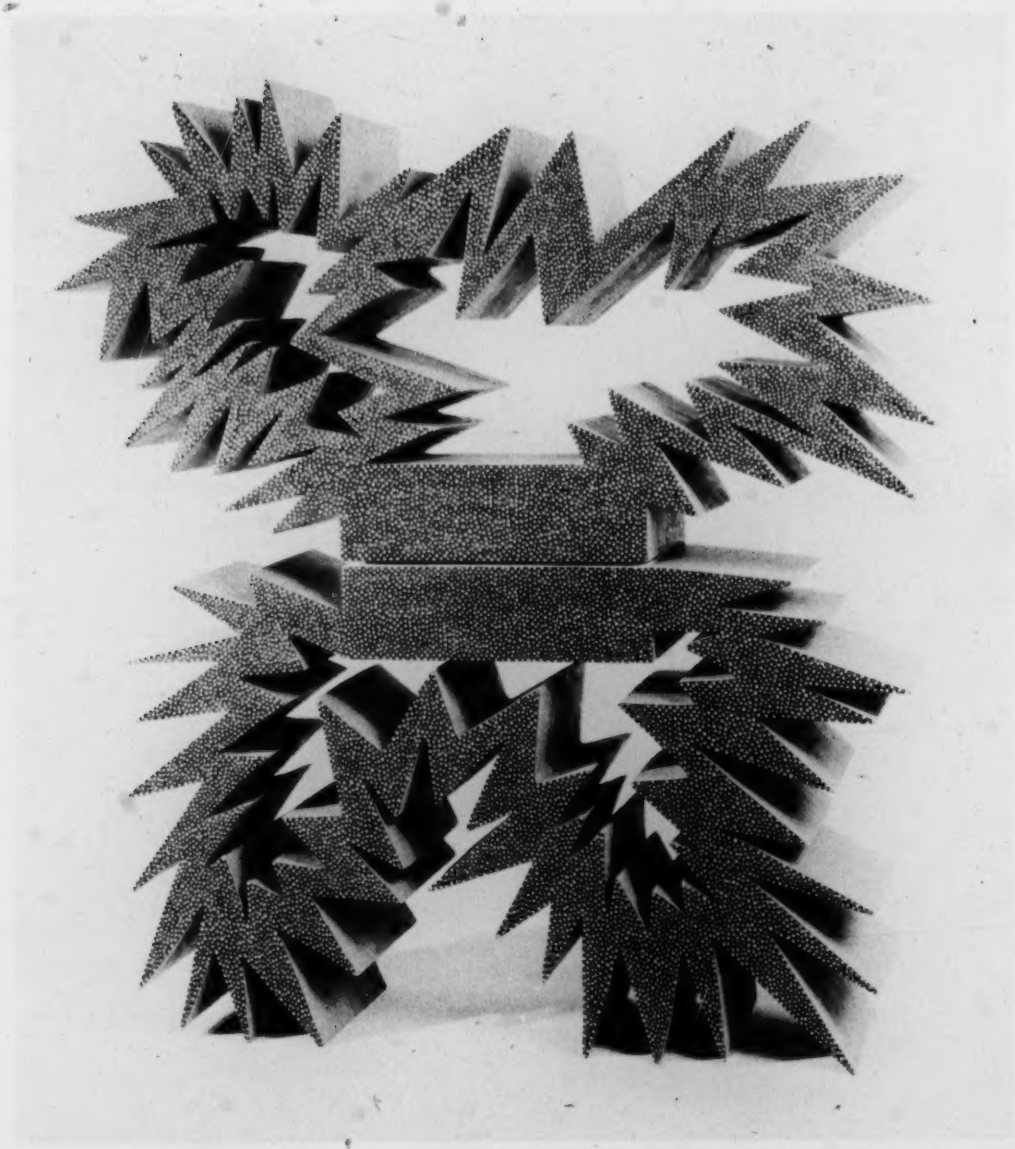
Box #59 1967
Wood, wool, paint
12 x 12 x 12
Lent by the artist

Box #61 1967
Wood, wool, beads, photo, pins, paint
6½ x 11½ x 8½
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Martin Falxa, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Box #62 1967
Wood, wool, photos, cotton, sea horse, denture,
beads, paint, test tubes
6½ x 12 x 9
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Edwin A. Bergman, Chicago

Box #63 1967
Wood, beads, washers, pencil, protractor, glass ball, wool
4½ x 10¾ x 8½
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Leonard J. Horwich, Chicago

Box #38 (Hermaphrodite) 1965



Box #76 1968

Box #68 1968
Painted wood
19½ x 12 x 12
Lent by The Pace Gallery, New York

Box #70 1968
Painted wood
16½ x 20 x 6
Lent by Dunkelman Gallery, Toronto

Box #71 1968
Painted wood
14 x 16 x 8
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Linton, Rye, New York

Box #72 1968
Painted wood
14 x 26 x 8
Lent by the artist

Box #74 1968
Painted wood
15 x 21 x 6
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Ratner, New York

Box #75 1968
Painted wood
27½ x 6 x 24
Lent by The Pace Gallery, New York

Box #76 1968
Painted wood
31¼ x 28½ x 6
Lent by The Pace Gallery, New York

Box #77 1968
Painted wood
31 x 24 x 6
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing A 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing B 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing C 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing D 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing E 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by City Art Museum of St. Louis, St. Louis

Box Drawing F 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by City Art Museum of St. Louis, St. Louis

BOX DRAWING H 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing J 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing K 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Box Drawing L 1966
Pencil and graphite
17 x 14
Lent by the artist

Untitled Small Box #1 (Prism with Face) 1960

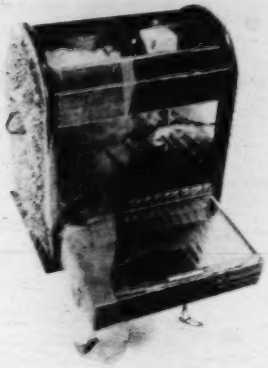
Untitled Small Box #2 (Open Box with Face) 1960

Untitled Small Box #3 (Small Cube with Face) 1960

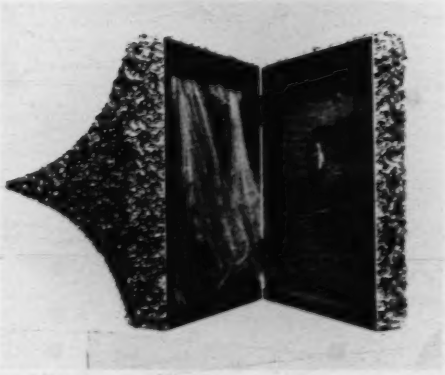
Untitled (Pin Box Construction/Dinner #7) 1963

Box #3 1963

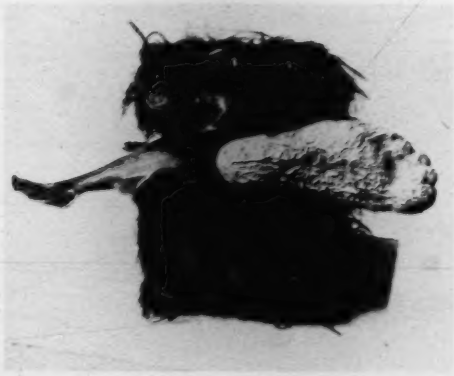
Box #4 1963



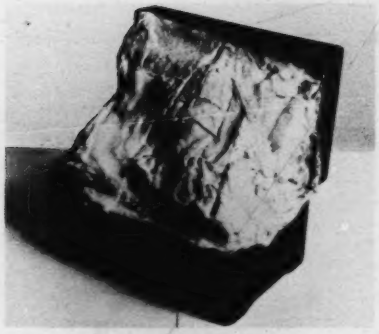
Box #23 1964



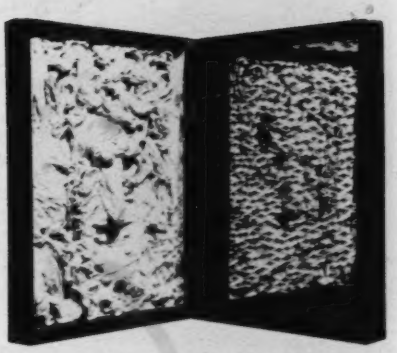
Box #27 1965



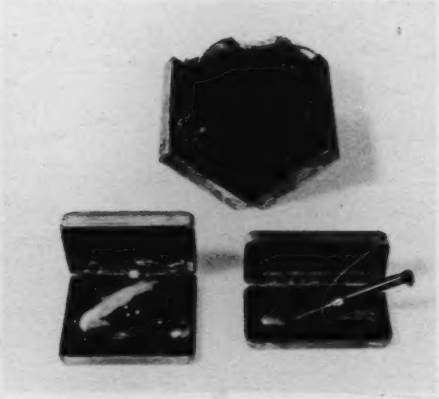
Box #28 1965



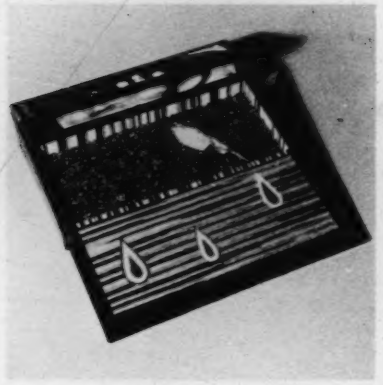
Untitled Small Box #4 1960



Untitled 1960



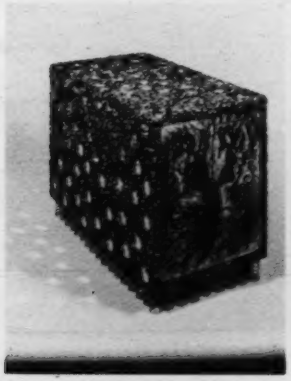
Three Small Untitled Boxes 1961



Untitled (Box #5) 1963-68

Box #6 1963

Box C (Box #17) 1964

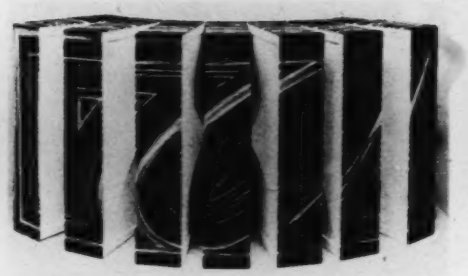


Box #31 1965

Box #32 1965

Box #36 1965

Box #40 1965

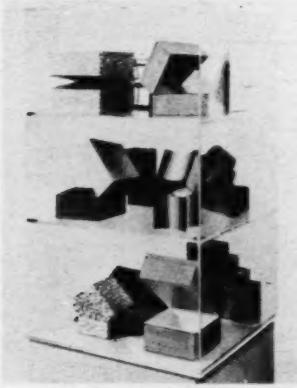


Box #41 1965

Untitled c.1965

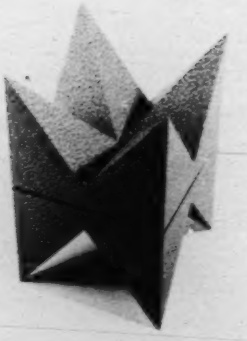
Box #52 1966

Box #54 1966

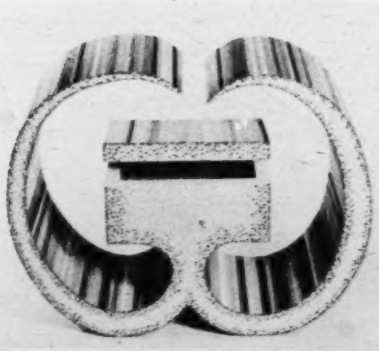


Transformation Boxes (Set of twelve) 1966-67

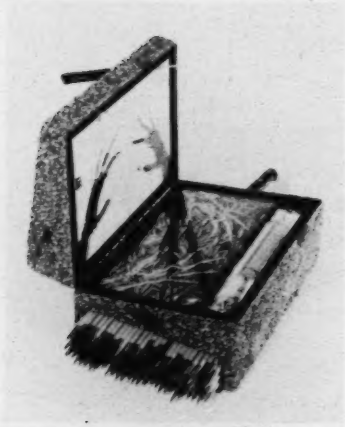
Box #63 1967



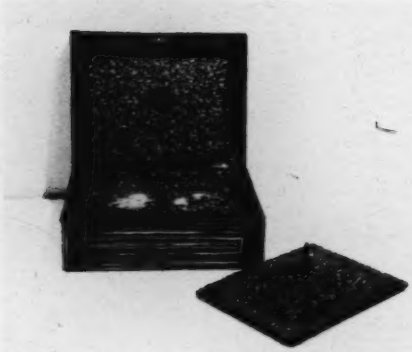
Box #68 1968



Box #70 1968

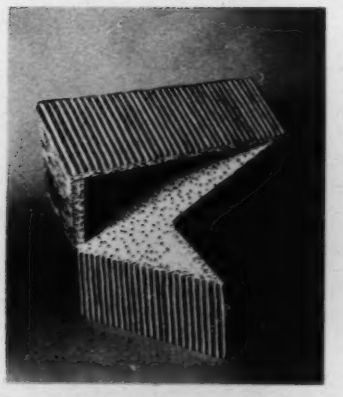


Box #48 1966

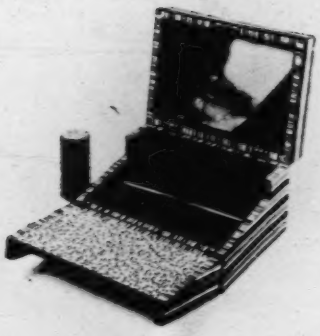


Box #49 1966

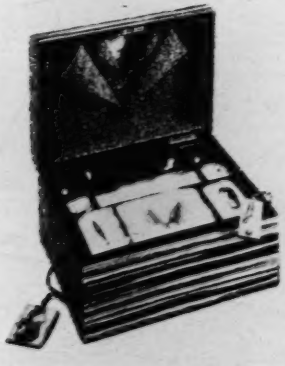
Box #50 1966



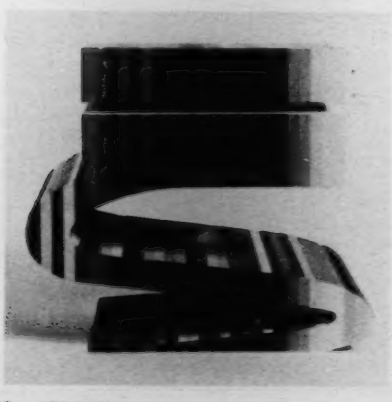
Box #59 1967



Box #61 1967



Box #62 1967



Box #71 1968

Box #74 1968

Box #77 1968

Box #53 1966

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